

COMMENTARY

PRAGUE: I SAW IT HAPPEN TWICE

An Eye-Witness Account of the Communist Coup

G. E. R. GEDYE

I AM standing on a great square before a vast Gothic building—the city hall—in the heart of a medieval city. Courtyards with renaissance colonnades and galleries open out from a maze of narrow, tortuous alleyways just wide enough for three—sometimes only for two—a maze where one can wander for an hour and always return to where one started. The cobbled square is lightly covered with frozen snow, trampled black by the endless procession slowly winding around it. In the center is evidence of progress—parked lorries, tanks, and armored cars. Boys in gray-green uniforms are quietly unloading the lorries,

glancing occasionally with curiosity, nervousness, or contempt at the endless stream of people. By the pavement stand peasant girls holding great baskets of “snowdrops.” Everyone buys a bunch. Silently, with streaming eyes, men and women drop them on the grave beneath the walls of the city hall where lies a nameless man who died, no one knows where or when. . . . The tears, the snowdrops are not for the unknown warrior. He is a symbol, an excuse. In my pocket is a paper bearing a winged swastika. After having hidden me for ten days, a British military attaché has managed to get this out of his German opposite number, who does not like the Gestapo. It tells me that I can go while the going is good—to-night or never—over the frontier into Poland. . . . The flower girl murmurs “Smutny, smutny”—“Sad, sad,” and thus, on this bleak day of March 1939, I take my farewell of Czechoslovakia as the Czechoslovaks take farewell of liberty, both of us believing that this winter of slavery will also pass in time.

That was just nine years ago. In between, the promise has been fulfilled, liberty and democracy, free speech and a free press have been restored to this little country—for a brief three years. Today it has lost all these again. Once more I stand before the noble Gothic building, now partially ruined. Once again the great square is filled with armed

G. E. R. GEDYE has several times had the unhappy experience of being on the spot when democracy went down before totalitarianism. He was in Vienna in 1938, at the time of the Anschluss; he was in Prague in 1939, when Czechoslovakian democracy was sacrificed to Hitler. And he was in Prague again this year when Czechoslovakia's three short years of post-war freedom came to an end. This description of the Communist coup was written on the scene. Mr. Gedye is one of the most highly regarded liberal political journalists in Europe, and is well known to American readers for his work before the war as Austrian and Russian correspondent for the *New York Times* and for his books *The Rape of Austria* and *Betrayal in Central Europe*. He was born in Somerset, England, in 1890.

men. They wear civilian clothes with red brassards on their arms and carry brand new rifles. The Communist factory militia has been brought on to the streets to show the people of Prague that they had better forget their dreams of liberty and democracy.

THE rifles are not needed. The Czechs have learned their bitter lesson: that democratic liberties are things which a little country set amidst mammoth states may cherish, but for which it is impossible to fight—at least, unaided. And this time there are no snowdrops. The tears fall only when Jan Masaryk atones for his first surrender to the putschists by leaping to his death from a window of the Czernin Palace. Once, indeed, the Czechs were eager to fight for freedom—in September 1938, when, at the threat of invasion by mighty Germany, they doused their street lamps, left their meals half eaten, and, truly the happy warriors, leaped to arms. I was among them that night when the Berchtesgaden Conference broke down and the Western powers who had been warning them against “provoking Hitler” told them “We can no longer forbid you to prepare.” And then, a few days later—Munich, when the British and French ministers, on the orders of Chamberlain and Daladier, pushed their way into the bedroom of President Benes and browbeat him until he consented to cancel the defense preparations, to yield up the cherished “Little Maginot” line, and to let German soldiers in to within half an hour’s motor run of his capital.

I saw the Czechs, tearful and cursing as they stood beneath the loudspeakers and heard the steps by which they were to render themselves defenceless at the insistence of Britain and France.

I think it was on that day that the Czechs lost their faith in their ability to resist aggression. In 1938 they suffered for daring to demand independence and democracy in the area claimed as *Lebensraum* by totalitarian Germany. Today they have been taught the futility of such dreams in the “outer zone” of totalitarian Russia.

Whose shall be the hand to cast the first stone at the Czechs for failing to defend their liberties? Britain and France cannot evade responsibility for the lesson of Munich. True, the “Voice of America” daily urged the Czechs to defend democracy. And the Czechs indeed feared Communist dictatorship—but above all they feared a revived Germany.

In Prague I was shown files of documents alleged to have been obtained by Czech agents in Sudeten-German centers in American-occupied Germany. Whatever one’s views of the morality of the harsh expulsion of three million Sudetens robbed of all their property, there can be no question as to the inexpediency of today permitting or encouraging these unfortunates, not to settle as best they can in Germany, but to press propaganda for a forcible return to the Sudetenland, for its re-annexation by Germany, and the consequent destruction of Czechoslovakia. I saw a photostat of a poster of September 1947 which was displayed in the Algau district (American) on the very frontiers of Czechoslovakia. “Join the pilgrimage to High Mass tomorrow, with the slogan ‘We demand our Fatherland back!’” I saw copies of circulars allegedly issued by the “Religious Help Center, Stresemannstrasse 36, Frankfurt-am-Main” (the “capital” of the American Zone), containing the phrases: “God give us back our Fatherland. . . . Father Reichenberger is working for the Cause in America.” And I saw what was said to be a “top secret” circular from the “Sudeten-German Freikorps” dated September 4, 1947, urging the recruiting of youths into “gymnastic” classes where “ex-officers and soldiers will train us in everything necessary. . . . The greatest caution is called for Czecho is about to collapse.”

I cannot vouch for the authenticity of these documents, which might just conceivably have been forged for a Czech Communist campaign, although I do not believe it. What I can vouch for is that they looked authentic, were couched in the authentic language of pan-German Nazis, and that I know from past experience just what such

"gymnastic" classes are. What says America? If these documents are genuine, her authorities must be tolerating their circulation.

Czech Communists have to thank Britain for another good weapon. Mosley, one hears in London, is a negligible quantity. Not in Prague, or anywhere among the hundred and twenty million Europeans behind the Iron Curtain, where the fact that Mosley is at large and able to pour out his poison while police protect him against public indignation, is a potent Communist weapon against Labor Britain. No use here to put forward the arguments about equal democratic rights for all ("What, for those who have sworn to destroy democracy?") or that facism can never win in sober Britain ("Did not sober German democrats say the same thing in 1930 about Hitler?"): The Czechs are hysterical about these things, misunderstand and exaggerate their importance? Perhaps. But this outweighs everything Britain spends on cultural propaganda—for which international Communism, now working for the destruction of democracy in Western Europe, is deeply grateful.

THE curtain rose on the prelude to this new tragedy of Czechoslovakia last June, when she shocked the Kremlin by accepting the invitation to the Marshall Plan Conference. With the strong Communist parliamentary minority of thirty-eight per cent assisted by crypto-Communists running the Social Democrats, Russia had believed the country was in the bag. It was good propaganda to allow her only satellite where Communists had gained strength through democratic, instead of through fraudulent, elections to play at democracy for some years. Czechoslovakia was Russia's shop window, where a real parliament, and democracy were temptingly displayed.

Overnight the Czechs' illusions were smashed. They had forgotten that these goods in the window were only dummies to attract woolly-minded Western customers. They thought they were free to decide that they needed the Marshall Plan. Among those who thought this were even some Com-

munist ministers. No wonder the Kremlin was shocked. Not even all Czech Communists could be trusted! At a word from Stalin, acceptance of the invitation was cancelled.

The Kremlin was placated but not reassured. Elections were approaching. Russia's grip must be so strengthened that it could never again be challenged. The Communists, though strong, were still a minority. They enjoyed socialist support through a working arrangement which sometimes failed to work. People were restive in the factories. In 1945 the Communists had seized key factory positions, having been the best organized, best armed, and the most daring of the resistance groups. The Red Army had increased their armaments. Their Moscow-trained organizers had been given precise objectives and seized them before the other parties realized what was afoot. At the outset the Communists had captured URO—the single, centralized Revolutionary Trade Union. Hence the big Communist poll in 1946. But now the workers were grumbling about Moscow's rigid grip. The innate Czech instinct for democracy was reasserting itself and strengthening democratic socialism. The Communists countered with factory terror—workers were forced to join the party, to remain within the Communist camp.

But after a preliminary rush to cover within the Communist party, there was a reverse movement into the opposite camp when it seemed that surrender to Russia on the Marshall Plan might not mean surrender to Communism at home. The Communists decided on a coup.

THE leader of the Social Democrats was Zdenek Fierlinger, a trained diplomat. I knew him well when, as minister to Vienna, and still a democratic socialist, he did his utmost in February 1934 to save arrested Austrian Social Democrats from the gallows of Dollfuss, Starhemberg, and the brutal Major Fey. Some Austrian socialists then on the run owed their lives to him and to the "Czechoslovak" passports that got them over the frontier. When I met him in Moscow in 1939, where he was Czechoslovak

minister, he was disillusioned and embittered by the betrayal of democratic Czechoslovakia by France and Britain. Representatives of the countries which had facilitated Hitler's rape of Czechoslovakia ignored him. Not so the Narkomindel, Russia's Foreign Office. Its astute chiefs kept up close unofficial relations with Fierlinger until the Russo-German Pact, and when that Nazi-Communist honeymoon ended, Fierlinger returned as Czechoslovak ambassador—and as a whole-hearted backer of Soviet policy and Communism. As such he was Czechoslovakia's first postwar premier.

Here then was an enthusiastic ally. On September 29 last, the Communist Premier, Clement Gottwald, and Fierlinger moved swiftly. Without consulting the Socialist party executive, they issued a totally unauthorized declaration that "the two parties" had agreed to present a single front on all political questions. Jubilantly the Communists cried out that fusion was on the way—as indeed it was. At the same time they tried an unsuccessful putsch against the Democratic party in Slovakia. But a Socialist congress met at Brno in November, and the democratic Socialists purged their ranks of the "cryptos." Fierlinger was turned out of the chairmanship of the party and many of his followers lost office with him. The party wanted to elect Dr. Majer, a right-wing Socialist, but feared to provoke the Communists too far. A left-winger, Minister of Industry Bohumil Lausman, was finally chosen.

Now the Kremlin was seriously alarmed. The Socialists were no longer struggling behind the scenes to ensure the survival of a measure of independence and democracy. They had nailed their colors to the masthead and had mutinied against the Communists' fifth column. Soon after Brno, Lausman authorised me to quote him: "You need have no fears for the independence of the Czech Social Democrats. Since Brno, the workers are flocking to our colors. This will be reflected in the May election results." He was confirmed by the unofficial polls which most Czechoslovak parties and some foreign embassies hold from time to time. The highest

percentage which even the Communist polls forecast for their party at the elections was 35 per cent instead of the existing 38 per cent. For their plans to succeed they needed at least 51 per cent and had boasted that they would get it. In January there began a steady decrease in the estimates of their strength, the lowest estimate being 30 per cent. "Free and unfettered" elections would spell disaster for the Communists.

EARLY in February the non-Communist parties realized that something was brewing. The Communist "cold putsch" appeared to have been fixed for February 29. The Communists, of course, "discovered" more and more "plots" but they were not allowed to have it all their own way. Three non-Communist ministers had received explosive parcels. The Minister of Justice, Dr. Prokop Drtina, arrested the Communist party Secretary of Olomouc as the responsible party. The Communist Minister of the Interior, Vaclav Nosek, released him. Dr. Drtina had him arrested again and Nosek again released him. Meantime a Communist arms dump was found in Olomouc.

The Communists arrested a number of Czechs who had served in Britain during the war, accusing them of the usual "plot" in the service of "foreign powers." The "plot" lost its allure when Dr. Drtina and the Deputy Premier Petr Zenkl revealed that a convict had been "borrowed" from prison by officers of the secret police. They had introduced him to two pseudo "American-Czechs" and told him: "You will go with these men and try secretly to recruit people to resist an expected Communist putsch, saying that Zenkl and Drtina are backing you. Your sentence is remitted."

The full crisis broke over what has been the cornerstone of Communist triumphs in every country in the Russian orbit—the "Communizing" of the police through a Communist Minister of the Interior. On February 12 the Czech Socialist party's Secretary-General, Krajina, told Parliament that a Cabinet meeting had established that the

"agents of foreign powers" were really *agents provocateurs* of the secret police. Another deputy revealed that police officials had to pay weekly visits to Communist headquarters for instructions. On February 16 the Communist chairman of URO, Antonin Zapotocky (today a Deputy Premier), said: "If Parliament does not accept URO's demands, away with Parliament!"

By a majority decision the Cabinet decided on February 13 that Nosek must cancel the dismissal of eight leading Prague police officials whom he had replaced by Communists, and instructed him to report to a Cabinet meeting on February 17 that he had complied. When that day came, Nosek failed to appear, pleading ill-health. The Communist Minister of Information, Vaclav Kopecky (Nosek's deputy in his absence), refused to speak for him. Next day the non-Communist ministers stated that they would not appear at Cabinet meetings until Nosek complied with orders and the plan to "Communistize" the police was halted. On February 20, the crisis came to a head with the resignation of twelve non-Communist ministers (who are believed to have been advised to do so by President Benes with the promise that their resignations would not be accepted; meantime Benes would try to heal the breach with the Communists).

THE Communists rejected every effort of the sick and failing President, and presented their ultimatum. The ministers must be replaced by men of Gottwald's own choice; his press poured out accusations that the ministers had planned an armed putsch. Soon arms were indeed seen on the streets of Prague—in the hands of the Communist work-militia, mobilized to exert pressure. In vain did the twelve ministers insist that they had no desire to drive the Communists from office but only objected to their dictatorship. In vain did Benes announce that no other Premier than Gottwald, leader of the strongest party, would be acceptable to him. The Social-Democratic leader, Lausman, insisted on compromise. But the Communists had seen their chance to establish the dictator-

ship they intended and yet to put responsibility on their opponents. Gottwald and Nosek called for the notorious—and quite illegal and unconstitutional—"action committees" of Communists to go into action.

When Nosek sent his police to invade the Social Democrats' (and other parties') headquarters, Lausman surrendered, while armed Communist bands tramped the streets—those toughs whom Mr. Platts-Mills, a Labor member of Parliament, was so curiously unable to see during the twenty-four hours he spent in Prague, though his fellow-countrymen, all of whom he so studiously avoided, could have shown them to him. The Communists never let up their pressure on the frail President, who was bullied as was President Hacha in Berlin in 1939. In vain did Benes publicly plead that he could not violate "my sincerely democratic creed." To the Communists he wrote on February 24: "Without betraying myself I cannot do other than insist on parliamentary government and democracy as the only basis for a decent and dignified way of life." By 4:30 PM next day, the Communists had got him down: he accepted the resignations and gave Gottwald *carte blanche*. "It has been very difficult for me," he apologized when Gottwald's men were sworn in three days later. "After long and grave reflection I decided that I could not persist in rejecting your demands. The crisis might have led on to the splitting of the nation and complete chaos. You want to conduct the state in a new way. I wish it may prove a happy way for all."

At once the Communist witch hunt rose to its zenith. Before the purges of the "action committees" there went down the flower of the democratic Republic—diplomats, statesmen, great writers and editors, the expert technicians of industry and commerce, rectors, professors, and students of the universities, scientists, famous socialists, famous liberals, the great colleagues of Benes and Thomas Masaryk—all who would not kiss the hands of the new dictators. It is not too much to say that the blow thus dealt to the country—with its currency already tottering, and the importation of essential raw mater-

ials an almost insoluble problem—by depriving it of nearly all its capable guides, will cripple it economically for years to come.

The figure for those deprived of their means of livelihood overnight runs into hundreds of thousands. How many have been arrested the government will not reveal. As happened after Hitler, a suicide wave set in, headed by Jan Masaryk. Thousands of desperate fugitives tried to escape across the closely guarded frontiers. Many who were caught were lodged, to the delight of Nazi war criminals, in the Prague prisons in cells adjoining their own.

THERE is one feature of the Communist coup which everyone praises—its brilliant stage management. How far the producers have progressed beyond the crudities of the Nazis, the shameless electoral terrorism of the Communists which I saw in the Rumanian elections of 1946, the patent falsification of the electoral register and the lorry columns of Communist multiple voters whom I watched in Hungary last year! If the farce of elections is staged in Czechoslovakia there will be no opposition, no free press, and everything will run smoothly. Thanks to meticulous preparation, the coup was completed almost without bloodshed. Within two days of its enslavement, the population was going about its business, cowed and depressed—but unresisting.

Yet the Czechs are at heart as democratic as the British, the Swedes, the Austrians, or the Swiss. The betrayal of 1939 had destroyed faith in the power of the West to help. The preliminary capture of the trade unions; the network of fellow travelers established in key posts in the press—including foreign correspondents—the lessons learned from earlier Communist mistakes, the Russian alliance, and, above all, Communist control of the police through the Minister of the Interior, made victory easy for the Communists. *It is for those countries where democracy still survives to examine each of these factors and secure their elimination while there is yet time—if there is time.* Otherwise there is nothing to do but wait

for the triumph of the man with the tommy-gun and the loudspeaker over those, no matter how great their majority, who have lost control of both.

WHERE will the Cominform strike next? My own guess would be Austria, although this would necessitate an invasion following some trumped-up incident on one of the Cominform's frontiers with this last bastion of democracy in Central Europe: alone, the Austrian Communists are powerless. But March 1948, like March 1939, seems to have awakened an unwilling world to a feeling that further appeasement or toleration of aggression can only whet the appetite and increase the strength of an aggressor who is deliberately preparing for war.

There are other possible objectives, of course. While watching the victory march of seven thousand armed Communists through Prague, I was accosted by a young man whose face seemed vaguely familiar. "You remember me?" he said. "We sat next to one another at a luncheon party given by the Ambassador of —, a year or so back." I told him I remembered. "It's gone magnificently here," he said. "I'm off to the next battlefield tomorrow. I think we shall pull it off there, don't you—it should be fun."

"Greece?" I asked him. He stared at me, puzzled by something. "Oh no!" he said. "I did not know any of us expected that just yet. No, it's to Italy I'm going tomorrow."

"And after Italy?" I said—"Austria?"

"Not so long as the four power occupation remains. No, then we shall have a go at France. That may prove very tough—the opposition is firmly entrenched. But, of course, we are strong too."

Then, before I could get any more interesting information he looked at me questioningly and said: "You are the correspondent of the 'Daily Labourer,' aren't you?"

"A slight mistake," I told him. "He was on your other side at that luncheon—I'm *Daily Herald*."

"Yes, now I remember," he said calmly. "How silly of me." And raised his hat in polite goodbye.